Sham Bards of a Sham Nation?: Edwin Muir and the Failures of Scottish Literature

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This essay is in a sense a preliminary attempt to engage with one of the most influential, if notorious, theories of Scottish literature, and to explore its validity, effect on, and relevance to, the place of Scottish literature in education. Given the essay's wide-ranging and polemical reflection, and its criticism of current educational policy towards literature in Scotland, it is argumentative rather than academic. In suggesting where I see the real failures involved in our awareness of the achievements of Scottish literature, my argument is ultimately an assertion of the crucial importance of the role and responsibility of education in our schools and universities in disseminating awareness of Scottish culture—and a criticism of the way that responsibility has been too often ignored. I would hope that such a general and political argument might be appropriate for this final issue of Professor Ross Roy's pre-eminent magazine for Scottish literary studies.

My title is derived from the famous description of Robert Burns and Walter Scott by Edwin Muir in his poem "Scotland 1941." There he describes them as "mummied housegods in their musty niches/ Burns and Scott, sham bards of a sham nation." His poem is a succinct version of his *Scott and Scotland*, his pioneering study of Scottish literature which appeared in 1936, and it strikingly sums up the agenda of the majority of the major writers of the so-called "Scottish Renaissance" of the 'twenties and thirties, when that great cluster of Scottish poets, novelists and dramatists sought to go back to William Dunbar and the sixteenth-century poet-Makars for inspiration, rather than follow Burns and Scott. They include Hugh MacDiarmid, Muir himself, William
Soutar, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, "Fionn McColla" (Tom MacDonald), James Bridie, and the too often neglected great women writers who arguably began the revival, Violet Jacob, Marion Angus, Catherine Carswell, and Naomi Mitchison. All to a greater or lesser degree articulated views of Scottish history and culture similar to Muir's in *Scott and Scotland* and "Scotland 1941." All, despite arguments regarding the place of Scots as a literary language, generally agreed that their Renaissance of Scottish literature and culture after the Great War had to be based on a repudiation of nineteenth-century cultural values and what they saw as that century's excessive religiosity, stemming from their view that the Reformation of 1560 and the Industrial Revolution in Scotland had brought about a disastrous Deformation of Scottish creativity and art. And that view has been held to with surprising tenacity by the majority of our best contemporary writers. Muir's influence has been profound.

Muir's argument in "Scotland 1941" is in two clear parts. He begins with a single line—a quiet, clear statement of a belief which underpins the fiction of Gunn and Gibbon; "We were a tribe, a family, a people." That statement, in its certainty and completion, asserts a benign simplicity in our origins—in contrast with the empty nature of modern Scotland, "a painted field" guarded by the icons of Wallace and Bruce. Scotland was once secure, with an ancient rural life Scotland roofed in under "a simple sky," and its green road winding up the ferny brae. Then comes Muir's all-important "But"—"But Knox and Melville clapped their preaching palms/ And bundled all the harvesters away." What follows is Scotland's version of Eliot's spiritual Wasteland, an old and more open and creative culture is stripped away. And the first half of the poem sums up the change, the "we" being modern Scotland; "Out of that desolation we were born."

The second half of the poem is Muir's examination of the post-Reformation process of civil war and denial of creative artistry, together with his argument that with the industrial revolution the worship of Mammon synthesized with the worship of Calvin's stern God. Obdurate courage and pride have paradoxically "made us a nation, robbed us of a nation"—that is to say that bitter argument and civil war have both forged a national sense, but destroyed the very qualities on which a liberal nation should pride itself. Central to it—and the entire poem—is its question-cry, "How could we read our souls and learn to be?" For Muir the function of art is here seen as to do with the raising of liberal consciousness, and Scotland, hostile to the freedom of creativity and in thrall to "pelf" and mere profit, has lost its creative soul, with Burns and

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1"Scotland 1941" appeared in Muir's second collection *The Narrow Place* in 1943. It can be found in most anthologies of Scottish poetry, but can be placed in the context of Muir's work in Peter Butter's edition of *The Complete Poems of Edwin Muir*, Assn. for Scottish Literary Studies (Aberdeen, 1991), p. 100.
Scott as sham bards, token gestures towards an abandoned art. The poem significantly ends by lamenting the futility of the divisions of such as Montrose and Argyle, “perverse and brave,” symbolic of a pointlessly divided nation, whose tragedy “might melt to pity the annalists iron tongue.”

In Muir’s identification of the twin hammer blows which he sees as crippling his Scotland, he misses out a strand of his larger argument in Scott and Scotland—paradoxically, the strand which I find most intriguing and frustrating in what I believe to be its ground-breaking insight—which then fails to follow through to other and arguably more positive conclusions regarding the quality of modern Scottish literature.

Muir’s study of the legacy of Walter Scott is in two parts, and I apologize for reiterating his well-known argument. The first part is nothing to do with Scott, but is a wonderfully concise and appreciative survey of Scottish literature before the Reformation. Assuming three stages of growth for a national literature—folk lyric, metaphysical poetry, lyrical drama—and assuming that such growth is premised on the existence of a national language, that of Scots, which had become the language of the court, the law, the people—Muir argues that by 1500 Scotland had developed a creatively successful literature in Scots which drew directly from the best that was thought and expressed in Europe in art and philosophy. Robert Henryson’s use of classical myth and legend, William Dunbar’s exploitation of the rhetoric and thematics of the best European poetry, Gavin Douglas’s translation of Virgil’s Aeneid, and David Lyndsay’s greatest of European morality plays in Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis, George Buchanan’s Latin prose and versions of Euripides—all these, together with the music of Robert Carver and so many Scottish achievements in architecture and crafts, suggest that Muir is right to claim that pre-Reformation Scotland had attained a rich and varied culture.

Then comes his ground-breaking argument, which I believe still has relevance today. In seeking to give the people what they most wanted, a bible in their own language, John Knox was forced, through lack of a Scots or Gaelic translation, to adopt the Geneva English translation. And in Muir’s view, it was not only the church’s hostility to folk poetry, drama, and the arts, which deformed Scotland, but the fact that people were forced to use this English translation. Thus, he argues, they had to work with two languages, one, Scots, for family and community affairs; the other, English, for church matters, thus moving Scots away from its centrality. This forms the basis for Muir’s argument that (borrowing a term from T. S. Eliot discussing changes in the language of English poetry) there was a Scottish dissociation of sensibility, in which the wholeness of the creative process was crucially damaged by the fact that one language, Scots, became the language of emotion, the other, English, the language of thought. “When emotion and thought are separated,” he argues, “emotion becomes irresponsible, and thought arid.” Thus he anticipates the later dominance of sentimental Kailyard writing in Scotland, what the historian J. H. Millar was to call “the triumph of sugar over diabetes.” Scotland’s
heart, thought Muir, was thus separated from Scotland’s head; our culture lost its fusion of feeling and thought.  

The claim seems at once original and simplistic. Yet there can surely be no question that such a sudden and forced linguistic change was the basis of a harmful split. And Muir misses the chance to enforce his argument even further by not stressing how the change was a double blow; since the Reformation sought to place a teacher in every parish, again using English. It could be argued that this is the point in Scotland where English became the language of upward social mobility as well as of education and thought. For the next four hundred years, down to twentieth-century writing, endless examples show how children were beaten, demoralized and essentially disenfranchised as they were prohibited in school to use their own language. As late as 1975, William McIlvanney’s great Ayrshire novel Docherty places at its center the predicament of divided loyalties in language. McIlvanney was himself a teacher of English and indeed an assistant headmaster, thus well aware of the place of education, literature and language in forming cultural awareness. His work continually speaks out for the culturally deprived, demanding respect without condescension for the ability of very ordinary people (in socio-economic terms) to grasp the best of national and international literature and thought. Docherty is his strongest exploration of divided family, social and cultural values. It is no accident that his most poignant illustration of English-Scots language tensions lies at the heart of his novel, since it is designed to show how an adolescent’s life choices can be crucially damaged by linguistic elitism. Conn is the third and youngest son of Tam Docherty, the socialist miner whose dour strength dominates the novel. In hoping for a better life for his sons he has seen one son, Angus, betray his community values by becoming a hated coal-boss. Mick, the other son, has been in his eyes crippled by his Great War experience, in his conversion to radical communism. Conn, a scapegrace of lively intelligence, is his last hope. Yet at the moment when Conn has to decide whether to continue with education to university, or to leave to follow his father in the mines, it is an issue of language which determines him to go against his father and become a miner. 

Late for school, he instinctively answers his pompous headmaster’s demand to know why with “Ah fell an bumped ma heid in the sheugh, sur.” The headmaster will not accept the Scots; “in the pause which follows, Conn understands the nature of the choice, tremblingly, compulsively, makes it’, by deliberately repeating the Scots till he is struck, and forced to translate into what the headmaster calls “the mother-tongue.” Scots, it is insinuated, belongs in the gutter where the Dochertys belong. He is belted savagely; on returning to his classroom he begins what any contemporary teacher would love to see

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happening. He explores language, by drafting a set of parallel translations—such as sheugh/gutter, glaur/much what is in a puddle when the puddle has gone away, whaup/curlew,'I was taigled longer nor I ettled/ I was kept back for a more longer time than I desired. The language of his parents comes back to him in vivid phrases such as "ye maun dree yer wurd" "saund-papered tae a whippet," or "a face tae follow a flitting."

The clear implication is that it is his parents and his background also being punished for their language. The end of the chapter can be read as deeply symbolic; Conn keeps his draft dictionary as a kind of talisman until he loses it—but "by the time he lost it, he didn't need it." He has chosen the coalmines. And it is worth further citing McIlvanney's powerful summary of Conn's situation, articulating as it does what must have been the motivating factors for so many Scottish adolescents who lost out on education and a better life because of the crass insensitivity of the Anglo-centric Scottish educational system. Conn

knew his father's contempt for the way they had to live and his reverence for education. But against that went Conn's sense of the irrelevance of school, its denial of the worth of his father and his family, the falsity of its judgements, the rarified atmosphere of its terminology. It was quite a wordless feeling, but all the stronger for that, establishing itself in him with the force of an allergy. 3

McIlvanney's anger at education's irrelevance and harmful effects can be matched endlessly in other Scottish writers, from Gibbon in *Sunset Song* (1932) and Gunn in *Highland River* (1937) down to the work of James Kelman, Ian Banks and Irvine Welsh. Few writers, however, have put so succinctly the force of linguistic prejudice in shaping decision. It must surely be allowed that Muir drew our attention to the roots of a long-lasting distortion of Scottish life and culture.

But is Muir right in his prioritization of language division as the most damaging issue in Scottish literature and culture generally? Are there not arguably other and even more pernicious forces at work, as Gunn and others described in their pictures of a more complete failure to allow Scottish examples in history, literature, local topography and events into the curriculum, as though none of these things were ultimately of value? The predicament of Scottish culture, I argue, is much more complex than Muir allows; and for me his greatest failure was to have decided that Scottish literature had been so damaged by linguistic incoherence that little of its product from Burns and Scott on mattered. It is certainly well evidenced in Scottish poetry and fiction from Ramsay and Fergusson on that writers persist in a nagging sense of loss, of unsureness of identity, register and language choice. That said, the evidence

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of Scottish writing from Ramsay on suggests that poets and novelists found enabling strategies to make the choices of language and register into rich and subtle possibilities. Ramsay's great and neglected Scottish-Augustan satire 'Wealth or the Woody’, on the financial collapse through excessive speculation in colonial ventures, the South Sea Bubble crisis of 1720, moves with fierce satiric effect from assured sarcastic English to a reductive canny Scots; Ferguson's poetry moves with equal sureness from Scots to English, and in ‘Tam o' Shanter' Burns marvelously manages to contrast the pace and peasant vigor of his supernatural folk-story in Scots with the beautiful reflective passages in English (with a Scots accent?) concerning the transience of pleasure. The effect is to let the two languages enrich each other—and to enable Burns’s satirical point to make itself—that wisdom shows guilt regarding pleasure to be a waste of time. Similarly, Scott, Hogg, Galt and Stevenson—and many other great Scottish writers—imbue their work with rich nuances of both languages, and today Liz Lochhead and James Kelman argue that the contemporary Scottish writer is actually enriched in possible choices of register, from street Scots through possible varieties of Scots which then effect satiric contrasts with received English, written and spoken. And can anyone seriously suggest that the poetry of MacCaig, Crichton Smith, and Mackay Brown would be better or less Scottish expressed in Lowland Scots or Orkney dialect?

I suggest now that there are fundamental flaws in Muir’s arguments—on his insistence on the primacy of language, and outstandingly in his view that that the effects of the Reformation were totally negative. Is, as he argues, a national language the pre-requisite of a national culture? Quite apart from using the multi-linguistic productions of many modern countries against this, the experience of Muir’s own time would argue against him, with MacDiarmid, Sorley Maclean and himself producing some of our finest poetry in three different languages.

Muir shares blame for the failure of Scottish culture between linguistic uncertainty and the religious Reformation of 1560. Stern Presbyterianism forbids spontaneous song, stripping not just altars bare, but stripping Scotland of its burgeoning Renaissance culture.

Does he not however seriously neglect the positive achievement of the Reformers? There was surely a kindling of democratic vision in the idea—admittedly restricted to males—that the people should choose their own ministers, a belief so passionately cherished that its erosion by Westminster led directly to the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843. And surely some credit should be given for the idealism of attempting to establish the world’s first state system of education, with a schoolmaster in every parish, and the right of the ploughman’s son to sit in the village school with the son of the Laird? Let us not forget that by 1572 Scotland had five Scottish universities (with two in Aberdeen) where England had only two...

But lest we protest too much, we should ask—what kind of educational system? In the 1980s I had been asked to review some seminal educational
texts, from Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762) to Thomas Day’s pious attempt to moralize Rousseau’s naturalism in *Sandford and Merton* (1783-1789). In reading *Emile* I was struck forcibly with the utter contrast between Rousseau’s pioneering views, which lead directly to our modern practice, and the educational ideals and practice of Knox’s *First Book of Discipline* (1559), his manifesto for Reformation. Let me summarize Rousseau’s insistencies. The child must be treated as an equal; physical punishment has no place; the child will avoid rote learning, and when bored, the topic will be changed to regain interest; the classroom will not be the only location of learning, since Nature holds God-given lessons, and by moving outside to fields, woods and rivers the child will learn to respond to the change of seasons and weather; and, crucially, the child’s feelings and intellectual views will be sought, and encouraged in poetry, song, essay and argument.

What contrast with Knox’s system! Poet Alexander Scott pithily summed up in his “Scots Education” which goes “I tellt ye / I tellt ye!” For too long Scottish children were treated, as Professor Gordon Kirk, the eminent Head of Moray House College of Education regularly used to argue, as “buckets into which inert facts were poured.” And again I try to summarize, this time in terms of the differences between Knox’s system and Rousseau’s—of course, too simplistically, but I would argue with some broad truth. Knox’s system, when compared to Rousseau’s, reveals itself as authoritarian and didactic as opposed to collaborative and elicitive; as learning by rote as opposed to learning through interest; as analytic rather than synthetic, deductive rather than inductive; as impersonal and emotionally detached rather than emotionally connective; rational and ratiocinative rather than imaginative; and essentially mechanistic as opposed to organic.

One is tempted to sum up that the essential difference is that Knox’s system is negative where Rousseau’s is positive; and one also recalls that in the famous, or infamous, “Savoyard Vicar” passages of *Emile* priests and established religion should have no place in a child’s education.

But whatever else, to its lasting credit Scotland had begun, with all its bias, a system which would bear rich fruit—not immediately; but as the twig was bent the tree grew. Despite the bitter religious divisions of the seventeenth century, despite Scotland’s bankruptcy from the appalling failure of the Darien Scheme at the opening of the eighteenth century, and despite 1715 and 1745, the second half of that century saw Scottish Enlightenment. Once again, however, as with my question as to what kind of educational system, I ask—what kind of Enlightenment? As with education, a kind of orthodoxy has grown up which sees it as a great burgeoning of Scottish genius—which of course, in

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very particular directions, it was. In 1931, in his ambitious survey of the Scottish enlightenment through the life of Henry Mackenzie, in *A Scottish Man of Feeling*, the American scholar, Harold Thompson, opened his first page with a wonderful litany of achievement for Edinburgh between 1745 and 1831.

Within Mackenzie's crowded lifetime of eighty-six years Scotland produced the greatest of sceptical philosophers, David Hume; the best loved of song poets, Robert Burns; the king of romancers, Sir Walter Scott; the two chief masters of modern biography, James Boswell and John Gibson Lockhart; the most virile of portrait painters, Sir Henry Raeburn; the greatest British architect of his century, Robert Adam. At the same time, the dynasty of the Doctors Monro made Edinburgh's Medical College the most respected in the world; Adam Smith founded the modern science of Political Economy; James Hutton did as much for Geology, and Joseph Black revolutionised Chemistry. Not was this all; the world's roads were rebuilt according to the methods of John Loudon McAdam; the world's industry was remade by the steam engine of James Watt; the world's annals of military glory shone with new lustre at the exploits of the most famous of regiments, the Black Watch. Nearly all that makes the name of Scotland great is of that Golden Age; to discover comparable achievements by so small a nation in so short a time we should need to back from the age of Mackenzie to the age of Pericles.  

This tourist tea-towel assembly prompted David Daiches, in his groundbreaking *The Paradox of Scottish Culture* (1964) to exclaim "A modern Athens indeed!"—but seriously to question Thomson. "Yet to run all these names together in one triumphant list, however flattering it may be to Scottish pride, is really very misleading," he argues, pointing out the tensions involved in merging such cultural disparities. To my mind Daiches remains the most perceptive of modern critics, responding sensitively to issues of class and language—yet, as I will argue, even he failed to follow through to reclaim the true achievement of our nineteenth-century literature, in its creative use of historical and linguistic tensions. And more recently, another American scholar, Arthur Herman, in 2002 produced his fine study of *The Scottish Enlightenment*. Herman of course recognizes dissociation and tension in Scottish culture more perceptively than Thompson; yet is there not a similar ring to his sub-title *The Scots Invention of the Modern World* (the main title when the book was published in the United States), which even more grandly celebrates Scotland's contribution to the world? "When we gaze out on a contemporary world shaped by technology, capitalism, and modern democracy and struggle to find

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our place as individuals in it, we are in effect viewing the world as the Scots did," he claims. 6

Without doubting the overall truth of such claims, do they not tend to cover some of the unpleasant side-effects for Scotland itself, such as the Establishment’s hostility to Scots and Gaelic which persisted till the 1960s, in outlawing the speaking and writing of Scots and Gaelic in our schools, or in the way second-hand Gaelic poetry was preferred in MacPherson’s Ossian as opposed to recognition for the living achievement of the great Gaelic bards Duncan Ban MacIntyre and Rob Donn? Such Enlightenment dissociation from past and indigenous Scottish culture is outstandingly and symbolically exemplified in the way Burns’s great predecessor Robert Fergusson, who lamented the death of traditional Scottish song, and mocked the genteel cult of sentimental feeling, was then left to die in the Edinburgh Bedlam at 24, just as Edinburgh’s New Town was building. Critics like Daiches and David Craig have emphasized the symbolic contrasts between Old Town and New Town, in the clash of social, cultural and linguistic values lying beyond their fundamental differences of architecture, and I accept their identification of the new Enlightenment snobbery whereby Scots become north Britons, training themselves to speak with English accents, searching out infelicities of parochial vulgarity in their writings, and modeling themselves in everything from behavior to architecture on English examples. For me what galls most lies in the snobbery of Literati taste and pretension which pushed Fergusson, Burns and Hogg to the periphery, and which in genteel Edinburgh poetry, fiction and drama of the Literati of the day produced novels, poems and plays so anglicized, affected and pretentious in their rhetoric that they are merely of documentary interest to the specialist scholar. There are two extremes of Scottish literature in the eighteenth century—on one hand the vernacular line of Ramsay, Fergusson, Burns and perhaps Hogg, using Scots; on the other, and to my mind far less successful in terms of creative writing, that would-be English, so succinctly summed up in a would-be drinking song in an anthology produced by one of the leaders of the Edinburgh Literati, Dr. Thomas Blacklock:

With roses and with myrtles
I triumph; let the glass go round.
Jovial Bacchus, ever gay,
Come, and crown the happy day;
From my breast drive every care;
Banish sorrow, and despair;

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Let social mirth, and decent joy
This delightful hour employ.7

And once again Daiches succinctly demonstrates how the bulk of the Literati succeeded only in producing pale imitations of polite Augustan verse.8

The picture is of course more complex than my simplification suggests, since Fergusson, who studied classics at St Andrews, could write Horatian elegies and brilliant English satires on Dr. Johnson, Burns could write in the manner of the Literati, and indeed was profoundly influenced by the Common-sense School of Philosophy, underlying his “the heart’s aye /the part aye/ that makes us right or wrong,” and Hogg tried hard to be accepted by the Literati. But the fact that none of them was in the end accepted as part of the polite Edinburgh scene is undeniable—Fergusson dying in the madhouse, Burns dying of rheumatic heart disease in Dumfries in 1796, and Hogg lamenting his exclusion from Blackwood’s Magazine in the 1830s. The Edinburgh Enlightenment was an era of fulfillment for many, especially for philosophers and scientists; but for many other and major writers from other parts of Scotland its influence could be seen as profoundly negative.

In recent years new arguments have been made to suggest, quite rightly, that we should not insist on demonizing the non-vernacular, non-Scots language achievements of eighteenth-century Scotland. Indeed, in these claims that the writings in English of Fergusson and Burns, Boswell and even of a re-instated Ossian Macpherson, and of the lucid prose of the philosophers Hume and Smith, there is a valuable warning against a kind of cultural atavism or nationalism which maneuvers literature into the support of a political agenda. That said, facts are chieles that winna ding; great philosophical argument is not the same as great creative literature, and just as excessive moral propriety damaged so much of nineteenth-century creative writing, so I believe that in Scotland the mixture of social and linguistic snobbery, together with uncertainty regarding national history and identity, caused a kind of dissociation—but very different from Edwin Muir’s!—in the minds of Scotland’s thinkers and writers. Just as the Union of 1707 split Scotland between Hanoverians, economically prudent and canny, and Jacobites, sentimentally lamenting their loss of status and language, so too was culture fragmented between urban-based North British and Anglo-Scottish Literati at one end of the spectrum, and a too often reductive, resentful and predominantly rural vernacular Scots poetry on the other—in short, at one extreme the philosophers and writers like


I return now to the matter of education. I would argue now that it was precisely the long gestation of Knox’s fact-and-disciplinary system working through two hundred years that laid the ground for the “hotbed of genius” which was the Enlightenment of Hume, Smith, Fergusson, Hutton, Watt and Black. Rational, skeptical, using English as a tool for clear and precise expression, these philosophers succeed in no short measure because their language is strict upon them, eliminating the distractions of feeling—which biographers tell us they certainly had, but reserved for their more sociable hours. Their Literati counterparts cannot remotely claim to rival them in achievement—all too often because, like Dr. Blacklock, their English is an acquired medium, lacking the feeling of language-in-the-bone which great writers need to develop their nuances of emotion and thought. Robert Crawford has argued that Scottish universities began the study of English literature in the eighteenth century, as the study of Belles-Lettres and Rhetoric—but I have serious reservations as to whether literature as conceived by the Scottish universities then would be called literature now, given that the method of instruction was didactic, with (mainly English) edifying literature used to provide examples of expression improving what was taken to be the inferior expression of the Scottish student. 9 What is beyond argument is that—with a few exceptions—Scots and Gaelic were now taboo in school and university for the next two centuries.

Thus the period of the Enlightenment had two extremes of language and literature—even, indeed, two schools of philosophy. Thus it could be argued that while Muir may not have identified precisely the villains of Scottish cultural failure, he at least recognized some major linguistic and social factors in cultural decline—if indeed, as I will challenge, such decline actually took place. But I go on now to argue that another kind of dissociation from that of Muir’s dissociation of sensibility can be seen developing through the next three centuries, as our pioneering educational systems endlessly forced children to learn facts, rather than articulating feelings. And the events of history seem to conspire to emphasize this dissociation, this context of oppositions and dualisms, from the opposing values of Knox and Mary to those of the religious wars, Argyll and Covenanters against Montrose and Royalists; then Unionists against Nationalists, and economically motivated Lowland Hanoverians against Sentimental Jacobites—a sad and quarrelsome repetitiveness indeed. Add to this recurrent theme of internecine division the other hammer-blows of history, the Bloodless or Glorious Revolution of 1689, Glencoe, the disastrous

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Darlen scheme at the turn of the century, and The Act of Union of 1707, leading to the last rebellions on British soil in 1715 and 1745—once again. Thus develops a repetitive and almost mythic dualism of two Scotlands regarding each other with distrust. Scott’s Rob Roy captures this perfectly in its juxtaposing of past-resenting outlaw Highlander Rob with his cousin, the forward-looking advocate of trade with the Americas in sugar, tea and tobacco, Baillie Nicol Jarvie. Meeting at midnight on the bridge over the Clyde, they are the two Scotlands, Highland and Lowland, suspicious of each other, but unable to deny ultimately their blood ties.

What is a Nation? Is it defined by homogeneity of Race? Language? Territory? All these elements so often change and reform through war and immigration. Much of what I now argue has been well put by better writers than myself, such as David Daiches and David Craig; but I restate the obvious the better to lead to my conclusions. Arguably only institutions define nationhood, and Scotland’s situation after The Act of Union of 1707 can surely be described in terms of constitutional dissociation, with two of the principal institutions of the time, Monarchy and Government, in London, while the three principal others remain. Scotland held on to its separate legal system based not as England’s on precedent and compromise, but on Roman and Dutch codified law; it retained its distinctive educational system. And what probably mattered most to Scots in 1707—and explains why, despite riots, the Union of parliaments went ahead,—was the retention of what they saw as the fundamentally important institution of the established Presbyterian Church, for which their forefathers had so bloodily fought. Lacking a parliamentary vote, most Scots saw their voice as registering elsewhere—and as Professor Harvie of the University of Tubingen has pointed out, The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland looked more like a parliament than many of the provincial assemblies of European states.10 The Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843 can thus be seen as a critical dissociation of Scottish people from political as well as religious influence—and it was a dissociation once again splitting the allegiances of Scots between emotional loyalties of the Scottish past and moderate, rational acceptances of the British present.

Scotland at the turn of the centuries around 1800 was thus deeply split in its politics, and culture, as well as its institutions. It had two extremes of literature, two schools of philosophy, and by 1817, two of the world’s greatest periodicals, The Edinburgh Review of 1802 and Blackwood’s Magazine in 1817, the first Whig and emphasizing philosophy and science, the other Tory, raised in fierce opposition to the Whig success, and emphasizing literature and arts. This opposition of forces at Scotland heart led Muir to claim that Scotland now had no valid cultural centre, with a fruitful interchange of liberal

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ideas, but instead a knee-jerk opposition which destroyed all possibility of real artistic achievement. And this in turn leads to his portraying of Burns and Scott as sham bards in a nation which he believed had lost the respect for creativity and liberality to which a real nation should aspire. It is this thinking which leads to his most shocking assertion—that Burns and Scott are the anachronistic and sham bards of a sham nation. Behind them, Scotland's capital is for Muir a blank at the heart of a fragmented Scottish culture, with religion, industry, and Romantic escapism to "Scotland" the causes of this breakdown of what had once been an integrated and homogeneous culture.

Much of my argument so far is a resume of the conclusions not just of Muir, but of many of earlier commentators. I now wish to suggest, however, that allowing much of their assessments of divided Scottish nation and culture to be valid, that there are very different conclusions to be extrapolated from their generally negative views of Scottish literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I would argue that Muir's personal traumas in Glasgow in the 1900s, and his subsequent departure from Scotland, prejudiced him against Scottish culture. Lacking formal education in Scottish literature, and disliking the Scotland which he left, he either did not know the range of Scottish literature in the century before him, or was prejudiced against it. Recent and international Scott criticism shows how he simply failed to understand Scott's colossal achievement in his pioneering treatments of history and psychology, landscape and symbolism, and in his subtle deflation of romance by a caustic realism. Muir's condemnation of Scott is deeply prejudiced; likewise his perception of Burns as essentially a song poet lacking intellectual depth fails entirely to recognize Burns's achievement in extended satire on religious bigotry, in which respect he has no superior in any literature. He does not comment at all on the achievement of James Hogg and John Galt, Margaret Oliphant, George Macdonald, John Davidson, to name but a few of the major figures being re-assessed today; and when commenting on Douglas Brown's The House with the Green Shutters he completely fails to see the obvious relationships in themes of family, cultural and linguistic dissociation with his own theory of Dissociation of Sensibility. Brown's novel is utterly about the split between emotion and thought, between an arid patriarchal authoritarianism devoid of cultural liberalism and its opposite, an untutored and spontaneous hypersensitivity. These opposites of Scottish character and culture are mutually destructive; but we should note that Brown has made great art from them, just as Scott, Hogg, Galt and Stevenson make great art from similar polarities.

While much of Muir's argument, however, has insight and relevance, especially in identifying the stultifying effect of extreme religiosity, it seems to

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me that, as I argued earlier, he overstates the significance of language disso-
ciation, and fails to see, for example, the huge achievement of Scottish fiction
in the nineteenth century. Further, I would argue that in blaming Reformation
and the church as source of Scottish cultural regression, he failed to see a more
potent negativity in Scottish culture, arising from Scotland's post-Enlighten-
ment educational system, Anglo-centric and antipathetic both to creativity gen-
erally and to the achievements of indigenous Scottish literature and culture.

I must be careful here in distinguishing between my previous arguments
regarding the frequently negative aspects of post-Reformation education in
Scotland. Yes, I claim that compared with Rousseau's system it muffles aes-
thetic development and creativity; no, I do not claim that the consequences of
this are general failure of artistic expression. Let me now invert Muir and The
Scottish Renaissance's central propositions regarding the failure of previous
Scottish literature, and instead of asserting religious, economic and educational
and political confusion as debilitating to creativity, let me argue two opposing
propositions; First, while allowing that Scottish cultural awareness in the
nineteenth century was subdued in terms of the overall awareness of the popu-
lace as a whole, that paradoxically individual and particular creativity indeed
flourished. Rather than damaging creativity in such cases, Scottish historical,
religious and social tensions and controversies actually fed creativity, as with
Yeats and Joyce in Ireland, and as with the work of great European novelists
like Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, and indeed as evidenced by Shake-
speare's great English history plays. Historical polarities and tensions are their
inspiration. I will return to consider this proposition. My second proposition
is simpler, and does indeed blame our educational system—but not so much in
terms of its content as its Anglo-centric disregard of indigenous Scottish lan-
guage and culture. I suggest that as a nation educating and disseminating our
culture we have for two centuries turned at least one blind eye to our real cul-
tural achievements. The responsibility for this neglect, I argue, lies with our
much-vaunted educational system.

We know our Burns, of course. But how many here can honestly say that
their education introduced them to the work of his great predecessors Allan
Ramsay and Ferguson from whom he learned form and content? Ferguson
he described variously as "my elder brother in misfortune," praising him as
"my elder brother in the muse" and for what he called his "glorious arts." And
Scott, whom every great European novelist acknowledged as their master, has
withered for us, because Scottish schools do not teach the history which un-
derlies his great Scottish novels, because the vast majority of our university
departments of English (and the Open University) do not include his novels in
their curricula and because Scott's satirical purpose, undercutting apparent
romance at every turn, has just not been recognized, since Scott demands in-
telligent and perceptive reading.

There are indeed many dissociations within Scottish culture, linguistic,
historical, and ideological. I now contend, however, that contrary to the argu-
ment that these have lowered the quality of our literature, there is abundant evidence that dissociation in many forms is the triumphantly satiric and tragic theme of our best novelists and poets. Let me begin a-chronologically with Scott, as he most effectively illustrates my argument. Why did Europeans respect him so much? I suggest that in three immense areas he pioneered the development of the novel. I have argued extensively elsewhere that these areas are firstly, in history and psychology; secondly, in landscape and symbolism; and thirdly, in his juxtaposing of romance and realism. His first great novel on the Jacobite rebellion of 1745-6 shows his pioneering achievement in all three. Edward Waverley is caught up in the Jacobite-Hanoverian clash, and Scott's new vision tries to understand both sides (as he does in his fiction on the wars of religion)—but simultaneously tries to understand Edward's individual and psychological response to history. At the same time the novel breaks new ground in the way Scott interweaves landscape into event, anticipating the Brontës and Hardy in his symbolic use of territory and its echoing of human action. And anyone who reads Waverley in the way it deserves knows that for all its exotic settings and apparently romantic highlanders, it brings Edward and the reader down to earth and to a realization that there is little enough of romance in the sordid dealings of the highland Chief Fergus Vich Iain Vhor and his duplicitous lieutenant, Donald Bean Lean.

Scott also tried, on a scale that not even Burns attempted, to create a narrative, or a kind of redeeming mythology, for Scotland. From The Lay of the Last Minstrel in 1805 through all the long poems, and then through the great Scottish novels, Waverley, Old Mortality, Rob Roy, The Heart of Midlothian, his theme is noble and recurrent—the wish that Scotland should forgive its bloody and internecine history, and put deadly sectarian and political schism in the past. The subtitle of Waverley is “Tis sixty years since,” which implies that it is time for Jacobites and Hanoverians to forget old wars; and the figure of Old Mortality chipping the moss from the gravestones of the Covenanters is presented more to remind us of how time is covering and obscuring these events, rather than glorifying the restorative work of Old Mortality himself.

Scott created nothing less than a School of Scottish Fiction, with its own un-English structures, patterning and symbolism. And virtually all great Scottish novelists till Lewis Grassic Gibbon follow him in it. Remarkably, Muir failed to see how uncannily Scott's symbolic patterning—and of his Scottish novelist followers—echoes Muir's dictum concerning the separation of emotion and thought, or as he simplifies it, the opposition of matters of the heart and the head. Scott's novels have frequently been noted for their recurrent oppositions of past against present, passionate outlaw against prudent Unionist, Covenantant against Episcopalian, Jacobite against Hanoverian. In terms of his treatment of Scotland, he does not celebrate the great figures and periods we would expect—Columba, Kenneth McAlpine, Alexander III, Wallace and Bruce, James IV or James VI, Mary Queen of Scots—none of these are chosen for the great novels. Instead, he chooses periods of civil war, which allow him to pose pas-
sion against prudence, the savage heart against the controlling head, and as I have crucially argued, Romance opposed by Realism. The outstanding examples are found in the novels of 1814-1818, in Waverley, Old Mortality, The Heart of Midlothian and Rob Roy.

And the same is even more true for Hogg the self-taught shepherd whose Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner of 1824 was praised by none other than Andre Gide as the world’s first great psychological novel. Beyond Hogg, the case is just as true for the fiction of John Galt and of Susan Ferrier, with their consistent themes of older Scotland set in contrast with the changes of the modern, of George Douglas Brown of The House with The Green Shutters, that most Russian and bleak vision of the corruption of a small Scottish town by its giant Mammon figure, John Gourlay, and its Highland version, John MacDougall Hay’s ambitious study of another Scottish-merchant-monster, Gillespie.

For what does a more sympathetic reading of our nineteenth-century fiction reveal as the main themes of the fiction? Essentially and repetitively, the portrayal of a dark central figure, a divided and neurotic self, set in a divided family, the family itself set within in a divided community and a divided nation. Beyond the many novels with such a dissociated protagonist, other fictions such as Hogg’s Sinner, Stevenson’s The Master of Ballantrae and Kidnapped, Crockett’s The Men of the Moss Haggs and many others recurrently portray divided families and communities, with the figure of a prudent and respectable protagonist set against his passionate outlaw opposite—often, significantly, his brother. A related opposition is that of a brutal materialist father and his rebellious sensitive son, mutually destroying each other in the collision of their values, as in Galt’s The Entail, Stevenson’s Weir of Hermiston, Green Shutters, and Gillespie. In all these novels the central theme is surely the dissociation of insensitive thought and excessive feeling, suggesting that too often Scotland has lost the ability to reconcile its opposite values. As one critic put it waggishly but perceptively around 1900, Scottish fiction seemed determined to “paint village hell where Scottish monster mutters/ Till Scotland’s one mad house with its Green Shutters/ Depict the lust that lurks in halls and hovel/ And build thereon a Scottish national novel.”

Given limits of space I can only assert here that the novels of Hogg, Galt and Stevenson—as well as those of Douglas Brown, MacDougall Hay, and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, to name only some of the outstanding figures in fiction—echo the dissociative themes of a Scotland in transition, with its past dislocated from its present, its sentiments for its languages and peripheral people set against the new hard-headed economic opportunism of the new Lowland merchant class Scotland, its old heart against its new head. What are

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these novelists recurrently implying? Surely that an older Scotland has dislocated itself in language and values from the Scotland which tore itself in two after 1560 and the Reformation, and tore itself apart again after the Union of 1707, with two civil rebellions. Running through the novels of the school of nineteenth century fiction are constant regrets for the loss of tradition, language, andolder community—with an attendant realism which accepts that change had to come to bring economic and social success. This is not a characteristic symbolic patterning of English literature, though undeniably similar, if less forceful, expressions can be found in its regional fiction, in the Brontës or Hardy, for example.

And where does poetry stand in regard to this? Both Ramsay and Ferguson speak eloquently for a Scotland lost or passing, from Ramsay passionately nationalist “A Vision” to Ferguson’s lament for the passing of native Scottish song. Likewise, there is no doubting Burns’s concern for an older, rural Scotland—his wonderful record of folk tradition and culture, in poems like “Hallowe’en” and the majestic “The Holy Fair,” show this, as does his monumental work recording folk-song for Johnson’s Musical Museum. Broadly, however, two voices can be heard—that of the philosophy- and- enlightenment influenced opponent of religious fanaticism, where he is deeply satirical concerning the people’s right to elect their minister, surprisingly viewing it as giving the brutes the power to elect their herds—and that of the tender and passionate celebrant of the ordinary man and woman. On one hand Burns uses the real language of men in a way Wordsworth and Coleridge never did, despite their professed wish to do so, with Burns surely standing at the head of any lyric poetry in any branch of English as representative of the human heart—and on the other, he mercilessly and intellectually dissects the pretensions and affectations of religious extremism and the unco guid. In the excesses of Calvinism Burns found a foe worthy of all his intellectual strength. Nowhere in literature in English is there to be found a more controlled and deadly dismantling of central Calvinist beliefs than in the opening verses of “Tam o’ Shanter,” as Burns effortlessly deconstructs predestination, original sin, the doctrine of the Elect, and Justification by faith as opposed to good works. But “Tam o’ Shanter” can also be read as social and religious satire. It is on the surface a traditional folk tale about human exuberance embedded in the hearts of all Scots, and on the other a sly allegory, which could carry the subtitle “the Presbyterian’s Nightmare,” satirizing the Scottish propensity to see joy as something which will inevitably be paid for. And “The Holy Fair”—which I think can stand as his greatest poem—juxtaposes the cheerful lasses Mirth and Fun going to the traditional fair with the new blight descending upon it in the glowing figures of Superstition and Hypocrisy. Thus old and new Scotlands jostle, with Burns’s heart clearly with the lovers on holiday, his head acutely observing and sending up bigotry.

Our national poetry after Burns becomes dominated by nostalgia, exile, and a plangent longing for lost causes and a rural past which cannot be re-
gained, from the poetry of Scott and the lay of his last minstrel and Hogg lamenting the loss of the Other Landscape of fairies, brownies, and the invisible spirit world to James Young Geddes charting the loss of a rural Scotland’s values for social and industrial change, as in his magnificent and unique long poem on industry’s effect on Dundee, “Glendale and Co.”

And while so much of late nineteenth-century Scottish poetry inhabits the Kailyard, there is no doubting the genuineness of its sense of loss of that older Scotland—a sense transmuted in the early twentieth-century by Violet Jacob and Marion Angus into a wonderful and metaphysical lyricism which opens the door to the achievement of MacDiarmid, Soutar and the poets of the so-called “Scottish Renaissance.”

But the very term “Scottish Renaissance” can mislead us in regard to the rich achievements of Scottish literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My argument, too briefly expressed, is that Scottish fiction and poetry, far from diminishing in cultural achievement for the reasons Muir asserts, absorbed the dualisms and antagonisms of history, patterning itself in fiction and poetry to express a set of national ideas and values in ways different from the social and class concerns of English literature. Thus the dichotomy in the values of Scottish mind and society form the central themes of our major writers. It is true that after the death of Scott in 1832, Galt in 1835, and Hogg in 1836, and with the Tory ascendancy in Scotland which led to the dominance of Blackwood’s Magazine, becoming a negative influence under the High Tory John Wilson, alias “Christopher North,” there ensued a kind of interregnum in which religious debates after the Disruption of 1843, together with massive urbanization, gave us our weakest two decades. Too glibly, however, and because universities and thence schools were simply disinterested, Scottish writing after 1850 has been written off under the twin terms “Kailyard” and “Celtic Twilight,” the first a kind of Burns culture gone to seed, the second a revival of Ossianic pseudo-Celticism. True, this sentimental and purple writing became immensely popular with a Western society extending far beyond Britain, which had become jaded by industrialization, and was desperately nostalgic for the consoling and timeless—images of cottage, glen, mountain and simple people which the Kailyard writers provided. The huge success of that commercial publishing cast a sickly smokescreen across what was really happening in Highland Clearance and overcrowded city, while simultaneously obscuring so much admirable literary work. Beyond Stevenson, currently being positively re-assessed internationally, writers like George Macdonald (whom C. S. Lewis and J. R. Tolkien admit was their profound

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Edwin Muir and the Failures of Scottish Literature

inspiration), Margaret Oliphant, Neil Munro, our greatest historical novelist after Scott and Stevenson, in fiction, and James Young Geddes, James Thomson, John Davidson, Violet Jacob and many others in poetry were producing devastating critiques of the hypocrisies of religion and society which all too often made them unacceptable reading in their time. Stevenson has been travestyed as a children’s writer, where stories such as “Thrawn Janet” and “The Merry Men” show him to be, like Scott and Hogg, deeply concerned with religious and social hypocrisy. Even more labeled as minor has been James Barrie, whose reputation as a wonderfully subtle ironist of fantasy and self-delusion is now being recognized, together with his dark satires on how Scotland damages its creative children in Sentimental Tommy and Tommy and Grizel, till recently virtually forgotten.14 In poetry, who has even heard of James Young Geddes, the Dundee disciple of Walt Whitman, and as I maintain, the greatest Scottish satirical and radical poet between Burns and Whitman? How many have been introduced to John Davidson, Violet Jacob, and Marion Angus, all predecessors of MacDiarmid? Indeed, elsewhere I have recently argued that the very term “Scottish Renaissance” must be questioned assiduously, since from Stevenson on Scotland has a literature well worth reading, teaching and discussing.

It was the German critic, Kurt Wittig, who first suggested in 1958 in his ground-breaking The Scottish Tradition in Literature, that our real cultural and literary revival started long before MacDiarmid persuaded us that he was the unchallengeable leader of Scotland’s recovery from parochial Kailyard blues. Neil Munro, Scotland’s leading journalist and historical novelist, looked around him at the turn of the century—and had no doubts that a Scottish revival of culture was in full swing, with Charles Rennie MacIntosh leading the way in architecture, the Scottish Colourists and the Glasgow Boys in painting, as well as the writing I have celebrated above.

If my argument regarding the failure to recognize both the quality and difference is for the moment accepted, then where should the blame for this failure be settled? For Muir was but one voice amongst many during the “Scottish Renaissance” (and for long after) to see Scottish literature as failing after Scott, and to blame excessive Scottish religiosity for the decline. I have suggested that we should not see the defects in the traditional post-Reformation school curriculum as necessarily crippling literary creativity—but now I would change tack and suggest that the principal failures of Scottish culture lie not in underachievement (we are indeed a small country, but producing remarkable literature), but in the failure of the crucial role of education as disseminator of history and culture to tell us of our history and achievements.

Working with The University of Glasgow's Unit for Continual Professional Development with courses for English teachers I am continually struck by the paucity of awareness of Scottish writers, older and modern, and the lack of educational introduction to Scottish literature in teachers’ university experience. I certainly was not taught Scottish literature in my Honours English course at Glasgow in the late fifties and early sixties, with the exception of a nod to the “Scottish Chaucerians,” Dunbar and Henryson. Our universities until comparatively recently virtually ignored Scottish literature, thus leaving our schoolteachers across the country unequipped to tell children who are their local and national writers in whom they can see themselves and their society as having tradition and validity. And Glasgow’s small department of Scottish Literature is still the only department in the world which offers both Honours and full postgraduate courses.

One would have thought that the “settled will of the Scottish people” to have their own parliament would have led to greater emphasis on Scottish literature and history. Indeed, and paradoxically, the failure of the 1979 Referendum Bill to establish a Scottish Parliament led to a wonderful upsurge in the quality and amount of Scottish writing. And the then Scottish Examination board introduced the requirement that in School Higher English examination there must be one answer (out of many) on one substantial Scottish text, or group of poems. How odd, then, that one of the first acts of our devolved Scottish Parliament was to instruct the Scottish Qualifications Authority to remove the requirement to answer this Scottish text in the Scottish Leaving Certificate Examinations, together with the abandonment of agreed new modules in Scottish Literature and Scots Language for sixth year studies. One can only conclude that our devolved parliament, with its affiliation to UK New Labour, is deeply concerned that attention to indigenous Scottish literary traditions would play into the hands of the Scottish Nationalist party. If this is a fair conclusion, it is also deeply worrying, in its blinkered view of the function of literature in society. Add to this that the majority of outstanding contemporary Scottish writers from Spark, Morgan and Kelman to Liz Lochhead and Janice Galloway, or John Byrne, Jackie Kay to Ian Banks, would scoff at the idea of their work showing any narrow nationalist political affiliation, and such curriculum limitation smacks of outmoded censorship.

I sum up my arguments and move towards conclusion. Firstly, I argue that Muir’s idea that Scottish literature went steadily downhill after Reformation and Industrial Revolution is deeply flawed, an argument made perhaps because of his own deeply unhappy experiences in Lowland Scotland. However, I suggest that he was on to something, but that because his prejudice against Scottish religion and culture—and perhaps his lack of knowledge, since after all neither he nor MacDiarmid had had the chance to study formally Scottish literature at a university or anywhere else—he simplified his case. His theory of Dissociation of Sensibility, I suggest, can be reformed into a critique of Scottish fiction and poetry which recognizes its pre-occupations with his-
historical and cultural division, its sense of a lost past, its recognition that our history has expressed itself in fiction in narratives which have pitted brother against brother, father against son, materialism against romantic idealism, perhaps, to simplify, Scotland’s head against its heart. These, I argue, are no mean themes, but mature considerations of our own historical and cultural influences and parameters.

The thrust of my other main argument is simpler—that where education does not educate, knowledge is lost, just as we have lost knowledge and respect for so many great writers who tried to present us with versions of ourselves. Universities have for too long left Scottish writing out of the picture, so our schools do too, paradoxically disencouraged as they are by even a devolved Scottish executive.

Lest I have seemed unduly negative, let me finish, however, with enthusiasm. Essentially I have been arguing that despite our historical and social difficulties, we have a rich culture for what is a population half of that of London. True, our poets, novelists and playwrights focus often on the darker aspects of our past. I have elsewhere argued that from Stevenson through *The House with the Green Shutters* to the fiction of Neil Gunn and Grassic Gibbon, and indeed much of the great writing of the so-called “Scottish Renaissance,” the hallmark is that of a kind of “negative positivism”—or “positive negativism”—as they satirize bigoted religion, excess materialism, and our bleak industrial growth. But is this not the paradox of a mature literature, that its sensitive and imaginative practitioners restlessly seeks out what challenges their vision, seeking unity but all too often dramatizing disunity? On this basis, we have all over Scotland, from Stromness to Langholm, from Ochiltree to Dunbeath, and from Glasgow to Edinburgh, a huge variety of writing both local and international. Scottish writing and culture has arguably never been so productive and internationally recognized.

The dissociation of Scottish literature and culture I have been postulating began to disappear after 1945. In the work of Gibbon, Gunn, Muir, and MacDiarmid the Renaissance had idealized a Golden Age of Scottish culture, as it sought to recover roots of language and identity; “Our river took a wrong turning, but we haven’t forgotten the source,” said Gunn in *Highland River* in 1937, and as Muir indicated in his poem, “We were a tribe, a family, a people /A simple sky roofed in that rustic day.” The Third Reich, with its back-to-the-land mythology, and its horrific emphasis on racial purity, rendered unacceptable all the dreams of small nations of finding an ancient racial essence in their

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rural past. Besides, in Scotland, the reality of post-war Scotland was no longer
glen-and-cottage based, but more likely to be found in overcrowding in indus­
trial slum and housing scheme, as the disillusioned satire of writers like Robin
Jenkins and Archie Hind made all too vivid and clear. MacCaig reiterated his
message that myth was the motto at the heart of a cracker, distrusting all ide­
alization of nature and landscape, Iain Crichton Smith found Gibbon’s standing
stones utterly incomprehensible, George Mackay Brown turned Orkney into a
private mythology, and William McIlvanney made the crime novel a metaphor
for what Glasgow had become. Once again negative positivism was our hall­
mark. This was perhaps another kind of dissociation, whereby writers of mid­
twentieth century Scotland felt utterly at odds with what Scotland had become.

All changed in the early ‘eighties, with the new magic realism of Alasdair
Gray, Edwin Morgan, and Liz Lochhead, to name the leaders in fiction, poetry
and drama. Gone were notions of racial essentialism and traditional supernatu­
ralism, and instead a fundamentally new vision emerged, of Scotlands rather
than Scotland, of possibilities and reshapings rather than inheritances, and yet
with a residual love of landscape and history which insisted on its own terms.
At last our literature—and other art forms—broke away from concern with
creative “wholeness” and ideals of national identity, and began to accept that
we are not alone in living in a fragmented and racially hyphenated world,
which will become more rather than less so. “Negative capability,” in Keats’s
famous sense of being able to live at rest amidst doubts, uncertainties, and
fears, has reached our writers, who portray myriad Scotlands, in historical sur­
realism, science-fiction, and magic realism, in an ever-increasing range of fic­
tion, drama, and poetry.

We are, I believe, in the middle of one of our greatest periods of literary
and cultural achievement. But for our—and our children’s—appreciation of it,
we need new maps, new university curricula, and re-enthused teaching, to im­
prove our media discussion and to give our new generations the real kind of
confidence to believe that their accents, their dialects, their English, and their
imaginative sense of having their own fit place in Britain and Europe. Even as
I write the literary organizations of Scotland have submitted a petition to the
Scottish Parliament asking for increased attention in the school curriculum
revision now being considered by the executive. Children living in the richly
various regions of Scotland have a right to require their teachers to be able to
tell them who their regions’ ablest writers are, and to be allowed to explore and
identify with these writers views of their region in their own reading, and in the
reviews of personal reading they are required to produce. This is not remotely
to argue that we ignore Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Arthur Miller, the war poets
of England; but today, with living writers of the talent of Edwin Morgan, Alas­
dair Gray, Liz Lochhead, John Byrne, Janice Galloway, Alison Kennedy, and
the rich heritage of Catherine Carswell, Naomi Mitchison, Norman MacCaig,
Iain Crichton Smith, George Mackay Brown, John McGrath, amongst many
others, I believe we are beginning to realize just how much we have been un-
dervaluing. Add the other visual artists—Joan Eardley, Robin Philipson, W. P. Gillies, John Bellany, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Steven Campbell, Adrian Wies­neovsky, and our contemporary musicians and increasingly confident filmmak­ers (not to mention the last century’s Scottish Colourists, The Glasgow Boys, and Rennie McIntosh) and the Scottish canvas becomes full—with artists of all kinds doing what they have done for so long in Scotland, with too little help from our educators and policy-makers. Too often it is our sham education and our sham politics which distorts the picture, so that in bad moments we feel ourselves a sham nation. Burns, Scott and their hundreds of fellow bards and artists are the reality of our culture; it is time to change those who keep them from us.

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